



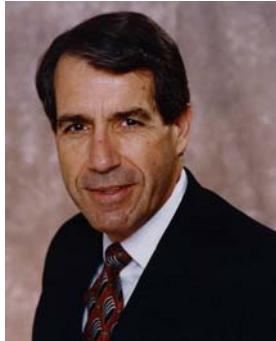
Reprinted from
The Florida Bar News
Stresslines Column
April, 2004

Extricating Yourself From The Stress Trap

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Stress takes a huge toll on the profession. Yet most attorneys have a love-hate relationship with it. They deal with it substantively only when serious problems with their health, relationships, or finances force them. Otherwise,



most simply accept it as “just how it is.”

Why? Because most attorneys believe, consciously or unconsciously, that stress and money are directly linked. They believe that to reduce stress one must reduce income. Dr.

Benjamin Sells, author of “The Soul of the Law,” says lawyers have a “cope or quit” syndrome: “That’s just how the practice is, and if you don’t like it, get out.” Of course, reducing income is a frightening thought to struggling attorneys, and even more so to those trapped in the “golden handcuffs” of high income (and usually high debt).

The stress/success link is one of the most pervasive myths of the profession, and one that holds too many lawyers back from growing their practices. Stress increases with volume only when the underlying management infrastructure of the practice doesn’t grow proportionately.

To put it another way, high stress can be a symptom of a poorly managed practice — or, more likely, an under-managed one. Don’t take this personally, however. It doesn’t mean you’re incompetent. You simply were never taught practice management skills.

Think back to law school. Do you remember any classes in practice management, marketing,

financial management, project management, or team management?

Unless your law school was truly unusual, the answer is probably “No!” In fact, law school gave you some hindering messages, such as “just be a great lawyer, and you’ll be successful;” and “you’re a professional, not a business person.” They gave you a disdain for anything that smacked of “business.” The only business lesson you learned was the “better mousetrap” theory.

And where did the stress-success belief come from? Thank your law school again. They purposely placed you in a constant state of stress with unreasonable demands, impossible deadlines, and undoable assignments to weed out the weak and toughen the strong. After living in that environment for three years, you naturally came to believe that the legal profession is inherently stressful and demanding.

Lawyers go from law school into the real world and continue the pattern. They focus on improving their legal skills, disdain management skills, and live in stress, because stress equates to success: (I’m busy, so I must be successful!) Stress is what got most lawyers through law school, and consequently many attorneys find they have trouble focusing on a task without a deadline. So when stress decreases, attorneys tend to actually create it, for instance by delaying work till a deadline forces them into hyperactive mode.

The reality of the legal world is that stress is the accepted substitute for missing business management skills.

If you’re not clear about this, answer three questions for yourself: First, over the last five years, how many hours have you spent in CLE and other legal skills development programs? Second, how many hours have you spent in business management, marketing, or team leadership

programs? And third, when do you do your best work, well in advance of deadlines, or when they're close?

For younger attorneys, this all sounds inane. Why do you need business or marketing skills? After all, the firm handles all the business stuff, and feeds you all the business you can handle, right? Right — and that makes you a fungible employee — a “grinder,” with no business to call your own. To become a “minder” or a “finder” requires skills in leadership, team management, financial management, and client management. The very best and most successful have worked on building those skills actively and consciously, and not grudgingly.

So here's the bottom line: Stress isn't “just how it is.” You can increase your revenues and actually decrease your stress. But it's going to require a perspective shift, and a commitment to studied, conscious changes in how you practice law.

It starts with a commitment to the concept that behind the practice of law is the business of the law practice. Legal services are the product you sell, and there must be an effective infrastructure around it to facilitate its delivery. Like any other business, yours requires its owner — you — to master other skill sets beyond your professional ones.

Once you have truly accepted that premise, a new vista opens when you start asking the logical question: “So what do I need to learn in order to manage my business successfully?”

The answers and the skills won't come overnight. But so long as you continue asking, searching, and learning, you're on the path to a more successful and more satisfying practice.

Here's a hint on where to start. There are actually four significantly different skill sets — and perspectives — required: The Owner, The Marketer, The Manager, and The Technician.

The Owner is the person who created the business with an objective in mind — financial success, personal fulfillment, and personal freedom. He or she is the strategist, charged with building and keeping the vision, and making sure that the practice has all the pieces in place to deliver on that vision.

The Marketer is the wheels of the practice — the person responsible for attracting business for the manager to manage, the technician to crunch, and the owner to benefit from.

The Manager is the traffic cop, the caterer, and the street cleaner, responsible for workflow, business details, and making sure there are sufficient resources available in the business for the other three roles to be successful.

The (Brilliant) Technician is the expert; the legal specialist who makes the product that is delivered by the business.

The more you can consciously focus these roles and master them — or in some cases delegate them — the more successful your practice will become.

Dustin Cole is president of Attorneys Master Class, a company which helps firms maximize revenue by enhancing attorney skills. Cole works with partners seeking to take their practices to the next level, and with practice groups to increase productivity and marketing effectiveness. For more information go to www.attorneysmasterclass.com. Cole can be contacted at (407) 830-9810 or via e-mail at dustin@attorneysmasterclass.com. This column is published under the sponsorship of the Quality of Life and Career Committee. The committee's website is at www.flu-lap.org/qlsm. The Quality of Life and Career Committee, in cooperation with the Florida State University College of Law, also has an interactive listserv titled “The Healthy Lawyer.” Details and subscription information regarding the listserv can be accessed through the committee's Web site or by going directly to www.flu-lap.org/qlsm.